



Connecting for Social Justice I

Deuteronomy 10:12-22

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Over the past month, we have been considering what it means to live out as a congregation our mission statement that proclaims, *We believe God is love, so we're making a place for everyone to know that love.* To define this statement, we have looked at the underlying core values.

If the first core value we talked about, *Welcoming and Nurturing Community*, defines our being, and the second, *Creative and Engaging Discipleship*, names our method, then our final core value names the 'so that' of our mission, claiming that we are *Connecting for Social Justice*. We are called to intentional, ongoing missional outreach that demands bold, new ways of sharing God's love.

Often, our mission statement takes on an internal reading. To say we're *Making a place for everyone* can be read, and often is interpreted, to say that should you choose to show up at the church, you will be greeted in God's love. Just the language of the statement seems to indicate that it is the location we are making into a place for all to know God's love: the building, the Sanctuary, the Fellowship Hall, or the preschool classrooms. There are many churches who adopt the Field of Dreams mentality, claiming, 'If we build it, they will come.' If we can 'make a place for everyone to know God's love,' people will inevitably show up. The 'Church of Dreams' vision is pervasive in Western Christianity. It's become a belief for many church leaders, both laity and clergy, that if our building is big enough, our lights flashy enough, our music jamming enough, our preaching prophetic enough, our VBS decorations superb enough, or our average age young enough, that people will miraculously just show up.

Perhaps there was a time in our history this was true, but it is no longer the case for the Church in America. The Western Church has failed our communities too often to be seen unquestionably as a desirable locale in town. From church leaders who have abused children and adults, to pastors who claim a need for multi-million dollar aircrafts, to finance managers who launder millions from the offering plate, to church communities who don't show in the midst of community crises, to policies that ostracize people based on their identities or decisions, the Church is no longer assumed to be a supportive institution in any community. Too often the church only looks out for and protects its own, forgetting about the very community in which the church was established to make God's love known.

Yet, for Washington Street, this third core value will not let us settle for simply creating a building in which people must come to to know God's love. Certainly in our foundational tenants of creating a *Welcoming and Nurturing Community* and *Creative and Engaging Discipleship*, it's important that we have a space where all can come to know, learn about, and be invited to respond to God's love. But this third value calls us to see the mission of the church

as greater than just supporting those who decide to cross the threshold of the door. *Connecting for Social Justice* calls us to find new ways to make God's love known beyond the walls of the church. This core value takes its origin in the scriptural call to be in right relationship with God, and is strengthened by our Wesleyan heritage, which names that our personal holiness is more than just being in right relationship with God, but indeed means being in right relationship with the world around us.

Our scripture reading today is part of Moses' lengthy speech, which began in Chapter 5. In total, Moses' speech lasts 21 chapters, going all the way through Chapter 26. (Now aren't you thankful I only preach for 20 minutes on Sunday mornings?) Here in Chapter 10, Moses poses this question, "What does the Lord your God require of you?" The question brings to mind Micah 6:8, perhaps a more well known text, where the prophet asks the same question, offering there three-fold, "to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God." Here in Deuteronomy, Moses answers a bit differently, though certainly with the same underlying fundamentals. Moses says, "You must fear the Lord your God, walk in the ways of God, serve God with all your heart and soul, and keep the commandments of God." To affirm and support his answer, Moses goes on, saying that the Lord has chosen you – the Lord has made you his covenant people.

As he continues, Moses takes the point a step further. It's like when your friend takes a joke to far, or when a metaphor goes in the wrong direction. Moses won't let us stay in the comfort of our mild understanding. He pushes the line, saying, "Circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer." ... ugh. What Moses? That's the best metaphor you can offer? Perhaps such a metaphor doesn't work as well for us today as it did for the ancient Israelite community. To make sense of it, we'll have to try and understand the line from their perspective.

We know that circumcision is the physical mark of belonging to the Israelite covenant community and [had] served since the earliest days of Israel as a visible *sign of the covenant*. It was a common practice, undertaken by each male in the community. "But [here], 10:16 offers again the wider view of Torah seen throughout Deuteronomy as the people are called to make their covenantal circumcision not just a *physical* mark but also a *mark* of the heart. The interior lives of the people of God shall bear the mark of covenantal relationship and fidelity."ⁱ

The call to the people of Israel makes sense in Deuteronomy as Moses is speaking strictly to a Jewish audience. Yet, we see the same language in the letters of Paul, who, as we have read in recent weeks, has no concern for physical circumcision or uncircumcision, but calls for the circumcision of the heart. The text begs the question, what does an outward mark or appearance matter? The call of the text, both in Paul's letters to the early Christian communities *and* here in Moses' teaching, is on a changed inner reality, "a reality perceived not by other people but by God."ⁱⁱ The invitation of the text is to cleave from the heart anything that renders it inaccessible to God's teachings. Christ himself teaches from this foundation of circumcising the heart many times, saying it's not enough to just avoid breaking the commandments as perceived by others. Christ says we must avoid the internal sin of the heart

that leads to such visible missteps. Remember when Christ said, “One cannot serve two masters. They will either love the one and hate the other, or hate the one and love the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”ⁱⁱⁱ What about when he said, “Everyone who looks with lust has already committed adultery in their heart.”^{iv} The call to circumcise the heart is a call to rid yourself, in the core of your being, of the feelings, the thoughts, the yearnings, the hopes, or the desires that go against the love of God.

This kind of cleansing of the soul, this level of internal faithfulness to God, this is what we often define as *holiness*. Holiness defines our right relationship with God, and has, from the earliest days of Methodism, been a primary focus of the Wesleyan tradition. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, defined the mission of early Methodists as, “[reforming] the nation, and in particular the Church, to spread scriptural holiness over the land.”

But we have skewed our understanding of holiness over time. Like the “build it and they will come” mentality the church has adopted, we’ve also perverted our understanding of holiness in the modern day. We talk about holiness in the narrow focused mindset of “personal relationship with God.” We have taught, preached, instructed, and held conferences on this idea of personal holiness. Just get your life right with God, and everything else will fall into place.

Perhaps the reason we have this problem is we dislike Moses’ analogy of circumcision so much, we just stop reading. Perhaps if we stopped here at verse 16, we *could* understand holiness as a personal, one-on-one connection with God and nothing more. But the text doesn’t stop, and so we can’t either. Verse 17 and 18 read, “The Lord your God is mighty, and awesome, partial and takes no bribe. Who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves strangers, providing them with food and clothing.” That’s great, God cares about others. It’s nice to know God cares about those who are underserved and on the fringes of society, which for some of us, means us.

But then we get to verse 19. “You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

This is where the challenge comes. It seems that our personal holiness “is inseparably linked to care for the widow, the alien, and the orphan.” It seems our circumcision of the heart does not stand alone, but stands in connection with our love of the other. I’ve said this before, but it bears repeating, the Biblical text should never be read out of context. Taken alone, verse 16 allows us to claim great faithfulness and holiness just by loving God. But taken in context, Moses says there is no faithfulness if one loves God and does not love the stranger, they are both necessities for holiness.

Such a claim of holiness is picked up by Wesley, who offers that the concrete expression of God’s love is manifested in justice, mercy, and truth. God executes justice, God extends mercy, and God is truth. “As the summary of God’s moral character they are also the summary of the moral image of God in which humanity was created.”^v When we are circumcising our hearts to

be more fully in relationship with God, we are cleaving all that is detrimental to these virtues. Wesley goes so far as to say that “Nothing can be more sure than that true Christianity cannot exist without the inward experience and outward practice of justice, mercy, and truth.”^{vi}

To love God with your heart, soul, and mind, *IS* to love the stranger, for God loves the stranger. “Love of the stranger is the corollary of circumcision of the heart.”^{vii} Where there is true holiness, these two things (loving God and the other), must – or to use the words of the text – *shall* go together. “To withdraw from people is to refuse to act in love and is thus a denial of holiness.”^{viii}

In the modern era, we talk about *this kind* of caring for the other, *this kind* of advocating for the other, *this kind* of missional effort with the other, as Social Justice. Here’s one helpful definition for this: “Social justice is the creation of social conditions which provide every person with the opportunity of fulfilling the potential of one’s personhood and to share in the necessary ‘good things’ of God’s creation. To accomplish this, social justice seeks to eliminate social injustice, all those social evils that threaten the welfare and destiny of God’s creatures.”^{ix}

Our core value says we are *connecting* for social justice. Connecting for the justice of others is a necessity for holiness. Our love of God necessitates our connecting with others on behalf of God. We cannot simply claim to love God and ignore the other, for that is not faithfulness – to love God *is* to love the other, because God loves the other.

To care for the other – the stranger – we must connect with others because the work of justice requires knowing, confessing, and denouncing injustice. We must hear the stories of those who have been oppressed and marginalized. We must converse with the underserved to hear of the injustices that exist. We must claim ownership of our own participation in the systemic evils of our institutions and in our own way of living. And we must advocate for those whom the systems of our community, nation, and world are set against.

Connecting also disperses power. We are not managing for social justice, directing social justice, or programming social justice. Connecting for social justice means working with the marginalized and underserved in ways that create an equal balance of power. We are not deciding for the marginalized what they need to succeed, but connecting to find ways that together, we can work against injustice, and implement practices in our personal lives, in our businesses, and in our communities that respect the humanity of all.

Connecting encourages engagement. No one person can solve the world’s problems, or create a truly just community. As much as we connect with others to learn of the injustices that exist, we must connect with one another to work against such injustices. Each one of us has gifts, ideas, knowledge, talent, resources, and desires that are needed in the work of making God’s love known in the world. There is no person in the community who cannot, in some way, be part of the work of God, for all were created by God with the purpose of being part of God’s redeeming work in the world.

Connecting for Social Justice is a core value of our mission statement, because only by connecting with others, creating relationships with others, learning how people have been marginalized, and identifying the ways we can act against injustice, can we truly work toward *Making a place for everyone to know God's love*. This is work that will likely take place outside of this building. We can not sit idly, waiting for those who are underserved to come to us and tell us about their struggles. It will require us making intentional effort to hear and respond to the God who sends us, taking seriously the great commission of Christ, and going forth, connecting with others, and in each place we may be – whether at home, in our neighborhoods, condos, at work, on the metro, in the airport or train station, connecting and working to make God's love known to all.

For the glory of God, may we not be so in love with our space, to think that God's love can only be made known here, but to be sent in true holiness to make God's love known to each person with whom we may have the opportunity to connect.

ⁱ Deanna A. Thompson. *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible: Deuteronomy*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014.

ⁱⁱ Patrick D. Miller. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Deuteronomy*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990.

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 6:24

^{iv} Matthew 5:28

^v David N. Field. *Holiness, social justice and the mission of the Church: John Wesley's insights in contemporary context*. wesley.cam.ac.uk.

^{vi} Field.

^{vii} Miller.

^{viii} Field.

^{ix} Frank Bateman Stanger. *Holiness and Social Justice*. *asburyseminary.edu*.